

Growing up 'Pacific' in Aotearoa

Pacific peoples have heritage ethnicities indigenous to the Polynesian Pacific Island nations of Samoa, Cook Islands, Tonga, Niue, Fiji, Tokelau, and Tuvalu. Together, Pacificans comprise 7% of the New Zealand (NZ) population, projected to reach 10% by 2026. Two thirds of all Pacificans live in Auckland with most living 'South-side' (South Auckland). Pacificans are youthful with a median age of 21 years (36 years for the total NZ population). Over a third of Pacific secondary students also identify as Maori, and less than a third also identify with a non-Pacific ethnicity.

Acculturation affects the degree to which a family integrates the broader NZ societal behavioural, norm and control beliefs into their family's ethno-cultural belief system and daily lives. As cultural norms evolve over time, and the cultures of younger populations evolve even faster, NZ Pacific families vary greatly in their structure. There is a spectrum of unique NZ Pacific families ranging from traditional extended families functioning as a collective clan, to nuclear individualistic families with a Pacific influence. As knowledge of the westernised culture is more widely understood, the sociocultural context of the more traditional Pacifican ways of life is described here to offer an insight into the continuum in which young people are growing up 'Pacific' in Aotearoa.

RELATIONAL IDENTITY and SPIRITUALITY

Resiliency is associated with wellbeing maintenance and stems from connected social relationships. In Polynesian cultures there is an understanding that all actions and interactions cause reactions, and that all relationships affect wellbeing. The relational identity of traditional Polynesian cultures is an identity of belonging to a collective kinship, rather than an individualistic identity. Consistent with the high value placed on kinship, a continuum of gender identities has traditionally been accepted more in Polynesian (and Asian cultures) than in NZ European cultures.

Polynesians had their own ancient Gods, spiritual beliefs, and taboos, prior to the Victorian era introduction of the Christian religion. For example, a common Polynesian taboo is the discussion of bodily excretory functions or sexual matters with family relatives of another gender. The clinician is exempt from this, however giving a patient an indication that very personal questions are impending will allow the patient to choose whether support people remain in the consulting room.

Many Pacific youth, but not all, belong to a church. NZ churches have provided ethno-cultural community centres since the first Pacific migrants established combined congregational Pacific Island Churches (PICs) in the 1940s. As numbers of each ethnic group grew, so did the number of ethnic specific churches. NZ-born Pacific have now established an increasing number of contemporary churches where younger Pacificans combine with other ethnic groups. In addition to weekly morning and afternoon services, churches also offer youth multiple activities for spiritual development, guidance and fellowship. These include choir, band, youth group, camp, sports teams, Sunday school teaching, mission work, and the working bee roster of the church and manse.

Most Pacific youth, including young adults who no longer attend church, identify as Christian. Most Pacific families will say grace before eating. Some hold evening family devotion services in their homes, and a few hold dawn prayers. A Christian upbringing usually includes baptism, annual national Sunday school exams, White Sunday service (led by children and youth held either in May or October depending on the church), and the 1st Holy Communion. These spiritual developmental milestones may occur with, or in place of, traditional coming of age ceremonies. In families where

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the Victorian abstinence-only Christian teachings dominate, the actions of alcohol consumption, sex before marriage and homosexuality are regarded as sinful, contributing to family conflict and emotional distress.

SERVICE and SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Pacifican youth are expected to demonstrate respect for elders, humility, hospitality, and generosity in their acts of service individually and through the collective team work required to host and cater for extended family gatherings. As Pacific youth have more relatives, family events in which they will participate occur more frequently.

Birth order influences but does not limit future family roles. The eldest child is often expected to take on a family leadership role and the eldest daughter to care for the elderly. If the family is titled, of noble lineage, or in ministry to the church, the expectations of adolescents to maintain family dignity and become a community leader are usually greater. Pacifican youth are more likely to be permitted to socialise with family and church youth where there is a common understanding of the need to take responsibility for each other's safety and dignity. When young Pacificans talk about being "under surveillance" by relatives and fellow church members, they most likely are.

Pacific-born young people tend to have the strongest sense of familial responsibility where their future adult life is economically entwined with their nuclear family, regardless of geographical distance. A portion of earnings is usually given to the household budgeter for weekly to annual expenses. When extended family events occur, such as funerals, all income earners are expected to contribute to their family's share of financial responsibility. Marriages, though not arranged by families, are usually organised and funded by extended families.

Most Pacific youth are expected to look after younger relatives. When trauma occurs, a sense of failure may be internalised. The greater the trauma suffered and the closer the connection, the greater the sense of failure and guilt. If young Pacificans are not offered opportunities to talk about past trauma, and their age-appropriate role, anxiety may become pronounced.

SOCIOECONOMIC VULNERABILITY and RISK MANAGEMENT

NZ society offers Pacific youth very easy access to alcohol, marijuana, and prepaid text messages, but limited access to supplies of condoms that fit, contraception, voice calls, and internet knowledge. Casual contracting has also placed many wage earning parents in economically vulnerable positions, with no leave entitlement to attend school or clinic appointments with their youth. Parents with abstinent-only knowledge but limited risk-reduction experience, appreciate the discretion of clinicians to help prevent premature parenthood, accidents or illness with their youth.

Pacifican youth tend to 'hold face' well and give socially acceptable responses. The greater the perceived power imbalance between young person and clinician, the less likely 'shameful' issues will be volunteered or admitted. Taking the time to read body language and gently explore inconsistencies between verbal and non-verbal language is worthwhile. When trust develops through good listening open communication, and acceptance for the young person as they are, health critical disclosures and then modification of actual health behaviours is more likely to occur.